

GREAT EXPECTATIONS
Matthew 24:32-44
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Do you know the feeling of investing a major block of time and emotional energy in waiting and then discovering that the person for whom you are waiting is not going to show up? Are you acquainted with the foolishness one feels when it becomes apparent that an event long anticipated isn't going to happen? The early Christians had a problem. They fully expected the world to come to an end and Jesus to return. They were wrong, obviously. What they thought was going to happen didn't. The expectation, however, never drifted very far from the surface of Christian consciousness. In every age there have been some who were convinced that the end was immanent, and that the best thing to do was to sell all your possessions and wait for it. I saw a bumper sticker recently that announced, ominously: I thought, that if "it" happened the vehicle in question would be without a driver. It occurred to me that if you fully expected that to happen, common courtesy ought to keep you off the streets.

In any event, the early Christian church had to deal with the disparity between what they thought was going to happen and the fact that history seemed to be continuing along its merry way.

The text this morning was written out of that situation. Immediate expectation of the end was evolving into patient waiting. It can be a disturbing, almost frightening text, if we fall into the two assumptions which have been made most commonly about its meaning; first, that the account is literal prediction, and the event discussed, the hour, the thief in the night, a literal affair...second, that the event in question is primarily judgmental: that when the Son of Man comes we are in trouble.

Let me make two suggestions initially in response to those assumptions. First, what we have here is a metaphor and it is a mistake to get entangled in the details. Second, the event in question - the Coming of the Son of Man, is primarily redemptive, not judgmental: that it is something to anticipate with great joy, not to await with fear and dread. And may I further suggest that in the midst of all of that is the meaning of this season of Advent which remembers an event that happened nearly two thousand years ago, but in a way that expects something to happen again and to go on happening?

What the writer of Matthew was telling the early Christians was this, I believe: there is great hope in the future. God loves the world. Be prepared to encounter His love, to be challenged by it. Be prepared to join up with it whenever it appears. No matter how bad things look for the human condition, God can and will work redemptively and creatively within it.

That's an important affirmation for us to make at this time. It's too bad, frankly that we get bogged down in the literalism of how and when the end is coming because there's an important word here that gets lost in the process. The word is one of love and hope and possibility. It is the word of Advent and it is a word the world needs to hear from us and that we need to say to the world.

It's a little difficult, frankly, to be hopeful about the future. Those who have much to say about it are either totally grim about the prospects, or else so defensive about the reality of our problems that they cannot discuss them rationally. Near the end of his life, H.G. Wells said, "It now seems to me that the whole universe is bored by the whole species of mankind. I can see the human race sweeping along the stream of fate to defeat, degradation and final defeat." Even humorist James Thurber had a grim vision of the future. "It is very hard to sustain humor," he wrote, "in a period where mankind

seems to be trying, on the one hand, to invent a pill that will cure us of everything, and on the other hand to invent machines for instant annihilation. (Theology Today, 10/80, p.323).

We are, in fact, a culture made vulnerable by our dependence on petroleum. We are, in fact, in a world where access to nuclear weapons is becoming ever easier: a world at the same time, fragmented, fractured, and on edge. No amount of pleasant rhetoric will make those realities go away. There are many who feel that the old fears for the end of the world are about to be fulfilled. It is difficult, frankly, to be hopeful.

I'm helped by the thinking of people who can see the whole picture. People honest enough to be realistic about the human prospect but at least open to the possibilities over the long haul. One who lifts my spirits is Lewis Thomas, head of the Sloane Kettering Cancer Research Center and the author of two fascinating little books of essays he calls "Notes of a Biology Watcher". The titles are Lives of a Cell and The Medusa and the Snail. Whenever I'm feeling bad about humanity, I find Dr. Thomas therapeutic. He writes, for instance, in a piece on the place of homo sapiens in the whole realm of biology..."We are the newest, the youngest and the brightest thing around...I believe fervently in our species...we are a spectacular, splendid manifestation of life. We have language...affection...genes for usefulness. And finally, and perhaps best of all, we have music. Any species capable of producing, at this earliest, juvenile stage of its development - the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, cannot be all bad." (The Medusa and the Snail, p.14).

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Lewis Thomas, although he does not use the language of theology, nevertheless, speaks a part of the Advent word with his broad and perceptive overview. The future is not only threatening, it is also full of hope and possibility. Technology may poison our air, pollute our streams, render us impotent when the oil runs out - but it may also lead us out of the wilderness. It may also feed us and save us from our own destructive impulse. The future is, at least, full of possibility.

But beyond the general hopefulness we bring to the future, Advent speaks a word about God's will and a vision of where that will is leading. The season invites us to prepare to celebrate an event that is the beginning of a process which continues in history; namely, God's reconciliation of all people to himself and to one another.

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Isaiah got rather specific, after all. Centuries before the birth, he told the people what the day of the Lord will be like...

"they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more." (Isaiah 2:4).

Do we dare that hope? Do we dare include that ancient vision in our Advent observance? Is the prophet's vision intended for real human history or is it, in one commentator's words, a "utopian cheap shot devoid of substantial historical human hope?"

The worst we can do, we 1980 Christians, I believe, is render our vision and our hope ineffectual because we have concluded that in our wisdom it is unrealistic. That's precisely what Advent is about - an event and a process moving against the tide, a force working in history to bind up wounds instead of inflicting them; a power bringing people and races and classes and nations together instead of driving them apart.

We must hold on to that for dear life. Of course, it isn't self-evident. Of course God's will in history is not as dramatic as the will of the President of the United States. Of course God's redemptive work is not as conspicuous as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, for instance. Advent reminds us that the birth itself wasn't dramatic by anyone's standards, or even very noticeable. God's son came into history through the back door, as it were, and God, it seems, wants it that way.

So in Advent, we are reminded to wait and watch because His coming will be a surprise and will happen in ways even we don't expect. In fact, the one thing you can count on is that when God does something, it will be subtle, planted in the soil of human ambiguity.

The point is to be waiting in expectation. As Halford Luckock put it once, to "live on tip toe", watching for the signs of His kingdom.

Ranier Maria Rilke in "Letters to a Young Poet", put it beautifully...

"Why do you think of Christ as the Coming One, immanent from all eternity?...What keeps you from projecting his birth into times that are in the process of becoming, and living your life like a painful and beautiful day in the history of a great gestation?"

(Proclamation 2, Advent, p.14).

I like that...your life and mine, like a "painful but beautiful day in the history of a great gestation". We will celebrate the event, the birth. The season of Advent invites us beyond the festivities of Nativity, to see the gestation, the gradual, gentle coming of God's Kingdom. Advent invites you to participate in it, to feel tugging at your heart, not only the sentiment and nostalgia which surround the holiday, but the impulse to join it: to make peace in your own relationships, to become honest about your own life, to give love and forgiveness and acceptance to someone who needs it, to gather someone's loneliness or grief into your arms, to give someone a gift who does not expect or deserve it. Because what will be tugging at your heart is not just sentiment but God's love - working through you - using your humanity, your faith and love and strength to make real His Kingdom.

Expect it. Count on it. Rejoice in it.

Amen.

Our Father, as we begin our journey through Advent, help us to perceive Your Presence in the world. As we celebrate love and generosity, family and affection and friendship, help us to perceive and celebrate Your Will at work. God Eternal, we are grateful for Your love. Come among us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.